

**STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE LEVELS
OF UNPLANNED ABSENCES IN THE
TASMANIA FIRE SERVICE**

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE UNIT

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An applied research project submitted to the United States National Fire Academy
as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

March 2001

ABSTRACT

Unplanned absences are a significant cost to fire services as they impact on essential minimum staffing numbers, disrupt routine, and disrupt planned training activities. Reducing the incidence of unplanned absences will enable fire services to make savings on salary budgets, enhance team cohesiveness and ensure training and community fire safety activities proceed with the minimum chance of disruption.

The Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) has insufficient information on factors critical to successful implementation of an absence management system. The purpose of this project is to develop an implementation plan for an absence management system that incorporates the critical success factors.

Elements of the National Fire Academy's (NFA) 'Change Management Model' (CMM), from the Strategic Management Of Change (SMOC) unit of the Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) are utilized within this paper.

The research questions asked were:

1. What strategies (models) have other organizations used to endeavor to improve absence management?
2. What factors made these strategies successful/unsuccessful?
3. What strategies are likely to work in the TFS and why?

This paper employed historical and evaluative research to establish the extent and causes of absence management problems and to identify potential solutions. A literature review was undertaken and survey instruments were sent to employees of the TFS. An analysis of actual leave taken data was conducted.

The major findings of the research was that successful absence management strategies are those that report attendance performance in an easy to follow format across the organization and then ensure that their frontline supervisors are informed and equipped to manage attendance issues at the base level. Strategies that address these three areas are likely to have a significant impact on the level of unplanned absences.

Recommendations to reduce unplanned absences focussed on (a) the development of accurate, timely, accessible, understandable and applicable attendance data for dissemination to all levels of the workforce, (b) the training and empowering of our frontline supervisors/managers to manage and be accountable for attendance management issues, and (c) the development of an absence management policy for the TFS.

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INTRODUCTION

Australia is popularly portrayed as ‘The land of the long weekend’ where ‘sickie’ taking is rife, costing employees many billions of dollars every year. (Wooden, 1992)

Unplanned absences from duty impact significantly on the management of firefighters and on day to day operations in career staffed fire service organizations. At the elementary level, staff absences increase operational costs as employers are compelled to continue to pay an employee even though he or she is not present and hence cannot contribute to output. This is directly due to the sick leave provisions commonly included within all major industrial awards and agreements. Over and above these costs is the cost of labour often required to fill in for the absent member of staff. This is usually only available at overtime rates. Overtime in the Australian fire services typically attracts a one hundred percent premium.

Disruption to team based training and other activities, the stress and pressure experienced by other employees when their workload is increased, and the cost of deliberately overstaffing in expectation of regular absences are costs additional to the obvious financial costs borne by organizations experiencing unplanned staff absences.

The purpose of this research paper is to identify what others have done to reduce unplanned absences, look at why these systems or strategies have either worked or failed, and to determine the strategies to reduce the level of unplanned absences the TFS. This research project employed a descriptive and historical research methodology to answer the following questions:

1. What strategies (models) have other organizations used to endeavor to improve absence management?
2. What factors made these strategies successful/unsuccessful?
3. Which of these strategies are likely to work in the TFS and why?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The TFS was formed in 1979 by the amalgamation of 22 Urban Fire Brigade Boards and the Rural Fires Board. TFS is the lead authority for both structural and wildland firefighting on private land, hazardous materials incidents, and technical rescue. Forestry Tasmania and the Parks and Wildlife Service are responsible for wildland firefighting over most public and state owned land, reserves and National Parks. The Tasmanian Ambulance Service is the primary provider of emergency medical services and road accident rescue.

Tasmania is an island state of Australia situated off the continent's southeast. Tasmania is Australia's smallest state both in terms of geographical size and population. The state of Tasmania is approximately 25,000 square miles and has a population of some 470,000. TFS is the state's sole fire department consisting of 241 separate fire brigades. Full-time career firefighters staff the four larger metropolitan brigades situated at Hobart, Launceston, Devonport and Burnie. The combined population of these metropolitan centers is approximately 300,000. The remaining 237 brigades are staffed exclusively by volunteer firefighters and are based in smaller towns and rural communities dispersed throughout the State. Volunteer brigades service a population of approximately 170 000 people.

The TFS has experienced significant organizational labour costs due to unplanned absences. This is presenting a problem primarily at the career staffed metropolitan fire stations. When taking into account the salary of the person absent and the cost of overtime replacement, the current cost of sick leave usage at TFS fire stations is around US\$375,000 per annum.

The Tasmanian Fire Fighting Industry Employees Enterprise Bargaining Agreement 1999 (the EBA) endorsed the introduction of revised management processes to assist in reducing unplanned absences. The agreement read in part:

The parties are committed to reducing, where possible, the numbers of hours lost due to unplanned absences within the TFS. The baseline for determining whether a reduction has occurred will be the unplanned absence statistics for the year ending June 1999 with a targeted reduction of 10% to be achieved by the end of this agreement. The parties recognize that decreasing unplanned absences will create greater productivity and consequent reductions in overheads ("EBA 1999," 1999, p.8).

Even the union recognized the distinct probability that unplanned absences could be reduced and that even minor reduction in absenteeism will improve productivity and reduce expenditure.

This paper has been written to satisfy the requirements of the SMOC Unit of the United States NFA EFOP. The SMOC Unit encourages fire officers to exercise creativity and innovation in problem solving and the application change management theories and models. As the TFS and many other fire services have been plagued for some time with the problems associated with a high proportion of unplanned absences, a thorough research of the issue and the development of creative solutions is an extension of the SMOC Unit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of available literature found that despite the importance and significant cost of absenteeism, there are relatively few studies or research products on the subject of attendance management. There are fewer still that concentrate specifically on fire services or similar organizations.

TFS corporate documents support the study of unplanned absence management. In its annual report, the section on personnel reported, “staff turnover” was 4.3 per cent for the year, a significant reduction from the 1998-99 figure of 5.9 per cent and reflects a decreasing trend in this indicator over the past five years. Similarly the average sick days per career staff continues to decrease, down from 5.8 days in 1998-99 to 5.1 for 1999-2000” (State Fire Commission [SFC], 2000, p. 19). While this provides evidence of an improvement in the organization’s performance, it is clear that the TFS seeks a further decrease in absenteeism. The EBA (1999, p. 8) notes that TFS and the United Firefighters Union of Australia (UFU), Tasmanian Branch, are “committed to reducing, where possible, the numbers of hours lost due to unplanned absences within the TFS”. The agreed target is for a ten per cent reduction over the two years of the agreement. Furthermore this section of the EBA concludes that “decreasing unplanned absences will create greater productivity and consequent reductions in overheads”.

The commitment in the EBA is entirely consistent with the views of the Australian Federal Government: “The central objective of the arrangements is to encourage and support the establishment and maintenance of a new workplace culture in which management, unions and staff have a shared commitment to continuing productivity improvement” (Cook, 1992, p. 2).

On a national perspective, “attendance management was the issue identified by the Employee Relations Sub Group of the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) in February of this year (2000), as the most singularly important issue to be addressed in the next twelve months by the Employee and Volunteer Management Strategy Group” (Australasian Fire Authorities Council [AFAC], 2000, p. 2).

The AFAC Attendance Management Guidelines (2000) provide practical suggestions on ways in which employee attendance may be improved. The guidelines do not purport to be

exhaustive or prescriptive, but they do represent a brief overview of ideas and suggestions that would potentially be of use to fire services implementing their own attendance strategies.

The type of absence of concern is the unplanned absence. However it needs to be clarified that some degree of absenteeism will need to occur anyway. According to AFAC (2000, p. 2); “It is accepted that eliminating all forms of non-attendance may not be possible or desirable”.

This view, or stance is not necessarily supported in the business community. Stone (1995, p. 545) believes “there is a misconception in many companies that some absences are inexcusable. From a business standpoint, all unscheduled absences cost money”. The focus of this paper is sickness absence, which is non-genuine and avoidable.

Most international literature research is based on United Kingdom (UK) fire services. The UK Audit Commission’s report *In the Line of Fire (1995)* undertook a total review of the value for money aspects of the UK fire services. The report summary listed a number of efficiency improvements that could be achieved. “In total it is estimated that sixty seven million pounds could be released through taking up local improvement opportunities” (Audit Commission, 1995, p. 6). The first priority listed was to manage absences more effectively.

The same report did identify cases where significant reductions in absenteeism had been achieved; citing one case where absences had been reduced from fifteen shifts per annum in 1989 to six shifts per annum in 1992.

The UK’s Home Office undertook an extensive review of sickness absence and ill health retirements in the fire service in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The report titled *Fit for Duty?* was initiated by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Fire Services early in 1999, as a result of growing concern about the impact that sickness absence and ill-health retirements were having upon the efficiency and effectiveness of the UK fire services.

Totalling some 113 pages, the report provides a huge amount of material and recommendations relevant to this paper. While *Fit for Duty?* did not include a detailed assessment of people management skills, it is of interest to note that “we saw evidence to suggest that there may be deficiencies in the training provided” (Home Office, 2000, p. 10). This view became evident in several articles and texts.

UK Divisional Officer, Alasdair Hay of the Tayside Fire Brigade completed a research paper in 1999. His paper analyzed several UK fire services and similar UK organizations in terms of their absenteeism rates and the various strategies and programs in use by these organizations to manage unplanned absences. Hay supports “systems which focus upon the individual and give responsibility for monitoring an individual's attendance to his/her direct line manager” (Hay, 1999, p. 17). This opinion is also shared in Australia and emphasized in a paper on absenteeism by a human resource practitioner with the Melbourne Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFESB). “There is clear evidence that people who are given more responsibility tend to be absent less from work. This also appears to be borne out by the (so far) anecdotal reports of low rates of sick leave at one-man stations in other agencies. The responsibility needs to come back to closer to the workplace” (McInerney, 1997, p. 14).

As far as Australian fire services are concerned, The Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority (QFRA) would appear to lead the way with a pro-active, sick leave policy. The purpose of the policy is “to reduce the abuse of sick leave by employees who are absent from work who are not genuinely unfit for duty, and it is to operate in conjunction with the provisions of the relevant awards” (QFRA, 2000, p. 2). QFRA shares with TFS a degree of commitment with the unions in that an absence management policy is a key component of both organizations enterprise bargaining agreements. TFS has not yet prepared a policy.

While a policy has not been implemented, TFS has made steps toward introducing an absence management system. A working party on absence management met on three occasions in 1998-99. A report from the working party had “developed a framework for a desirable future absence management system” (Absence Management Working Party, 1998). The next step as identified in the report is to undertake discussions with employees across the uniformed parts of the service, on the suggested framework for managing unplanned absences.

Fire service culture is mentioned in several texts as being strong and a barrier to absence management. An article on change management initiatives in one of the UK’s largest metropolitan brigades, Greater Manchester County Fire Service, the author notes “that traditionally, like many brigades, people management has not been one of its strengths” [(Lynch, 2001, p.3). Lynch, in the same article, refers to the required cultural change as ‘demilitarization’.

In another reference to the military or paramilitary nature of fire services, Yu-Chun (2001) stated; “I found the paramilitary style of management has a negative effect on both the psychological well-being and job attitudes of firefighters” (Yu-Chan, 2001, p. 24). Yu-Chan goes on to recommend that in order for the modern firefighter to be independent and creative in the performance of his/her duties, supervisors will need to treat firefighters as independent adults with a high need for growth rather than treating them as impotent, dependent infants.

Iverson, Deery and Irwin (1995) define absence culture as a normative belief in the legitimacy of absence taking.

It is evidenced by a work group belief that it is acceptable to take sick leave days for reasons other than illness. Despite their potential importance, work group norms have

received only modest attention in the literature, particularly when modeling individual behaviour (Iverson et al. 1995, p. 266).

In answering the question, how do absence cultures develop, Nicholson and Johns (1982) in Goodman, Atkin and Associates (1984, p. 377) “suggest that each such culture has a societal dimension and an organizational dimension”. While the former is largely a product of society’s assumptions about employment and absence itself, “the organizational dimension of absence culture is a product of a specific organization’s technology, control system, status hierarchy, division of labour, and so on” (Goodman et al. 1984, p. 378). Given the previous references to the paramilitary structure of fire services, it may be fair to say that links exist between fire services traditional structures and absence culture.

Another large component of fire service business is in the area of control or dispatch operations. Basically control staff receive alarms and emergency phone calls and dispatch appropriate resources according to the information received. In more recent times this type of work has become highly reliant on computers, particularly since the introduction of computer aided dispatch (CAD) systems. In a study by Buckle and Woods (1998) it was identified significant problems existed among the UK Fire Services staff. “Sickness absence was twice that expected, physical and mental ill health was significantly worse than expected, and job dissatisfaction was significantly worse than expected” (Buckle and Woods, 1998, p. iii). This report concluded with an action plan focusing on such issues as; new career paths for control staff, additional integration of control staff with other brigade functions, more consultation on the introduction of new technology, increased training opportunities for control staff and the development of local monitoring and feedback mechanisms.

Change management is the theme of this paper, and as such the theories and models relating to change on individuals work groups and organizations are investigated in the literature.

The National Fire Academy Strategic Management Of Change Student Manual

(1996) recognizes that the governmental or public sector is no longer exempt from change. In fact, the text states “these organizations are often the hardest hit by change because they are the least accustomed to it’ (p. SM 1-6). Directly related to the high incidence of absenteeism in the TFS is another statement taken from the SMOC Student Manual:

Recently, the public sector is coping with the same or similar influences as the private sector – downsizing, increased emphasis on outcomes instead of output, and shrinking budgets. In addition, increased awareness and involvement by the public, coupled with a growing intolerance for waste and misuse, is demanding that agencies readdress their philosophies about “business as usual” (p. SM 1-6)

Some writers have referred to the absenteeism issue as being a cultural problem. Clark (1994, p. 255) says, “organizational cultures can be changed, for example, by a leadership change, personnel turnover, or by crisis. But cultural change in organizations usually occurs slowly and is not easy to achieve through planned strategy”.

Directly relating to organizational culture and it’s links to absenteeism is the following comment from Schein (1981, p. 314):

The organization’s culture conveys to employees things like the acceptability of absenteeism and, when at work, how much effort one should give. Some cultures encourage employees to use their sick days and do little to discourage absenteeism. Not surprisingly, such organizations have much higher absenteeism rates than those organizations where not showing up for work, regardless, of the reason, is seen as letting your co-workers down. Similarly, culture conveys to employees how much effort they should exert. A strong culture can stimulate productivity or act to restrict output (Schein, 1981, p. 314).

PROCEDURES

Definition of terms

Unplanned absence- absence that is not normally planned or predictable. This includes leave such as sick leave, leave to care for dependents, work-related injury absences, special leave, leave without pay and absence without leave.

Planned absence- leave that is usually planned in advance. This would normally include recreation leave and long service leave.

AFAC- Australasian Fire Authorities Council: The peak Australasian Fire Services organization primarily established to provide improved collaboration between the Australian fire and emergency services and land management agencies, particularly in the exchange of strategic information and the development of national positions.

Absenteeism- The non-attendance of employees for scheduled work.

Certified Leave- Absence supported by a medical certificate.

Uncertified Leave- Absence not supported by a medical certificate.

Day Worker- An uniformed staff employee whose ordinary hours of work are between 6.00 am and 6.00 PM Monday to Friday. In the TFS this does include a provision for the employee some nights and weekends as the job may require.

Shift Worker- An employee required to work on a rostered pattern performed seven days per week, which may include night shifts, weekends and public holidays. In the TFS this means working a 10/14-shift system.

Shift- A single work period. May be as short as eight hours for a day worker or as long as fourteen hours for a firefighter working a night shift.

10/14 Shift- A rotating shift cycle comprising of two ten hour day shifts (8.00 am to 6.00 PM) followed by two fourteen hour night shifts (6.00 PM to 8.00 am), then followed by four days off duty prior to again stating two day shifts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data analysis

To establish the extent and nature of the problem presented by unplanned absences in the TFS, an analysis was undertaken of historical data by the writer in November and December 2000 of TFS sick leave taken data. The data from years 1993-94 to 1999-2000 was used for this analysis. This identified the proportion of sick leave used as leave taken with a certificate and leave taken without a certificate, against employee groups. These groups were subdivided both functionally and geographically. Further analysis of this data identified days of the week, and night shift verses day shift trends.

AFAC undertook a survey of all Australian Fire Services in the later half of 2000. The purpose of this survey was to collect national comparative absence data so as to 'benchmark' performance against worker type (day worker/shift worker), month of the year, and specific agencies themselves. AFAC proposes to regularly conduct this survey so that changes to agency performance can be monitored against changes in agency policies, procedures and practices. This data is included at Table 1.

Survey

The writer undertook a survey of TFS staff employed under the Tasmanian Fire Fighting Industry Employees Award. This excluded administrative support personnel, mechanics and radio technicians. The purpose of the survey was to gain an understanding of

staff behaviors, attitudes and opinions in respect to the use of unplanned leave. One hundred and fifty three uniformed operational staff responded to the survey (almost 55% return); details are included at Appendix B.

Literature research

The writer carried out a search in November and December 2000 of human resource management literature on the causes and effects of unplanned absences, and strategies for their reduction. The literature research produced several journal articles, research projects and textbooks, as well as articles available on the Internet. The literature was evaluated to identify the nature and extent of problems associated with unplanned absences experienced by fire services and other similar organizations (emergency services and service organizations with rostered shift workers), to identify strategies which may be effective in reducing unplanned absences in the TFS, and to analyze the effectiveness of the absence management strategies that may be applicable in the TFS.

Assumptions and Limitations

When comparing data and information relating to levels of unplanned absences, it must be understood that each state fire service utilizes different human resource management systems and data collection criteria, therefore making it difficult to compare ‘apples with apples’. In addition, when analyzing data from other organizations differing legislative, economic, social and cultural considerations will have an impact on absence management and strategies that work for some services may not work for others.

The writer’s internal survey attracted a 55% response representing a valid sample of the operational uniformed service. Most questions were posed as a statement with a multi-choice response ranging in six degrees from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. Having six possible choices meant that the respondent had to bias his or her answers one way or

another; there was not an opportunity to have a mid-range response. This must be seen as a limitation.

TFS 'sick leave taken' data has been collected and presented in work area groupings. In the main this determines the employee type in terms of TFFIE award staff as opposed to other award staff, of day workers as opposed to shift workers etc. but this is a generalization. For example, some career brigade staff are in fact day workers as are some FireComm (dispatch) staff, and some regional and divisional are State Service Award employees. The 'sick leave taken' data therefore has some limitations. The writer's survey data however, clearly differentiates between day and shift workers, and was only distributed to TFFIE award staff.

In hindsight the writer's survey could of included the respondents age and possibly gender as some of the literature indicated age profile was often a contributory factor in attendance behavior statistics.

RESULTS

Research Question 1 – What strategies (models) have other organizations used to endeavor to improve absence management?

In order to firstly understand the extent and specific nature of the absence management problem across Australia's fire services, AFAC's Employee Relations Sub Group undertook a survey in the later half of 2000 to collect national absence figures from all major Australian fire services. The survey asked for the data to be presented identifying employees by type (day worker, shift worker and total) and leave type (certified, uncertified and family).

Due to the differing data collection systems, award and legislative requirements, some fire services had difficulty in presenting their information in a consistent and useful way for

comparative purposes. In addition, some fire services had not provided any of the required data at the time of writing. Refer Table 1.

Table 1. AFAC 'National Absence Figures – Uniformed Staff 1999/2000

	TFS	FESA	MFSSB	CFA	NTFS	ACT	Air services	SAMFS	NSWFB	QFRA
Day Workers										
Certified	0.89	2.03		2.16	14.35	3.3	0.29			
Uncertified	0.51	0.55		0.59	0.54	0.46	0.29			
Family				0.04	0.32	0.35	0.29			
Total	0.4	2.58		2.79	15.21	4.11	0.87			
Shift Workers										
Certified	2.25	2.35	6.05	2.93	4.57	4.43	4.3			
Uncertified	1.37	3.03	2.63	2.58	1.36	3.41	2.14			
Family			1.13	0.04	1.01	0.86	0.22			
Total	3.62	5.38	9.99	5.55	6.94	8.7	6.66			
Total Employees										
Certified		2.34		2.44		4.27	4.17			2.85
Uncertified		2.94		2.03		3	1.73			3.26
Family				0.04		0.78	0.19			0.36
Total Employees		5.28		4.15		8.05	6.09			6.47

Note 1: SAMFS and NSWFB have not provided data for the table. QFRA have not provided a day/shift worker split; but total employee figures are provided. NTFS and TFS have provided day/shift worker figures but not totals.

Note 2: A high figure for NTFS day workers certified leave is influenced by long term illnesses together with a small number of employees in this group.

As a general observation, while most services were aware that they had problems with absenteeism, only two seemed to have a strategic plan or system in place directly targeting the problem of absenteeism.

NTFS in 1998 introduced a formalised arrangement where crew supervisors (Station Officers) received a report each month on the absence rates of the crew(s) under their control. Along with their own crew(s) performance data, they received data on service averages, best

performing stations and crews , and worst performing stations and crews. Senior managers followed up with supervisors where patterns of continual high absence rates existed.

This model, according to NTFS senior executives, reduced absenteeism rates by almost 40% immediately. The program was especially effective at reducing the uncertified component of unplanned absences.

In 2000 the QFRA introduced a structured 'sick leave management procedure'. The QFRA approach to absence management is a step by step process for both managers and supervisors.

The steps are:

1. Increase awareness and monitor sick leave absences
2. Initial interview with employee
3. Satisfactory/causal reasons for sick leave absences
4. Unsatisfactory reasons for sick leave absences
5. No improvement/breach of ceiling
6. Performance and discipline procedures

The procedure is thoroughly detailed in a nine page policy document and includes template letters and a planning guide.

The UK review *Fit for Duty?* provides a vast amount of information on the subject but does not focus specifically on any particular service's strategies. The review did however compile a checklist of 'good practice' as the review identified from fire brigades and other organizations. This checklist is attached as Appendix C.

Latham and Napier (1984) cited in Goodman et al. (1994) say that in the U.S.S.R., Communist Party Chief Yuri Andropov initiated an ongoing campaign against employee

inactivity and irresponsibility. In August 1983, the Kremlin stepped up the offensive by announcing measures aimed at increasing employee attendance. “Under the new rules, people who where absent from their jobs without a good excuse will loose a day of vacation for each day that they are not present”. In describing the new measures, the party daily *Pravda*, according to *Time*, blamed not only workers but also managers who did not (1) set an example of discipline, (2) properly organize the employee’s work, or (3) fully use the employee’s time (Goodman et al. 1984, p. 323)

At a major Canadian telecommunications company, management tried everything but the level of absenteeism wouldn’t go down. Finally they put up a high, visable board with everybody’s name on it and posted a gold star next to each name when people came to work. Absenteeism dropped dramatacally – almost overnight. Thus, it’s believe that measuring attendance and posting the results for each individual should increase overall employee attendance significantly(Goodman et al. 1984)

Miller (1978) cited in Goodman et al (1984) reported a study conducted at Parkdale Mills, Inc. Prior to the study, people who were absent were repremanded. Those who had good attendance records received no comments. A fifteen week baseline showes that attendance averaged 86 percent. At the end of the baseline period, a daily chart was placed in the work area. A blue dot was placed on the chart beside the name of each person who was on the job. A red dot was placed beside the name of each person who was off the job. A person who had been absent was welcolmed back to the job by the supervisor. No verbal or written reprimands were given. The supervisor maintained this graph daily. In addition , he posted a weekly attendance graph that showed the percentage of people who attended the job each day. From a baseline average of 86 percent, attendance averaged 95 percent for the following nine week period. The costs of this program were less than ten dollars.

Research Question 2 –What factors made these strategies successful/unsuccessful?

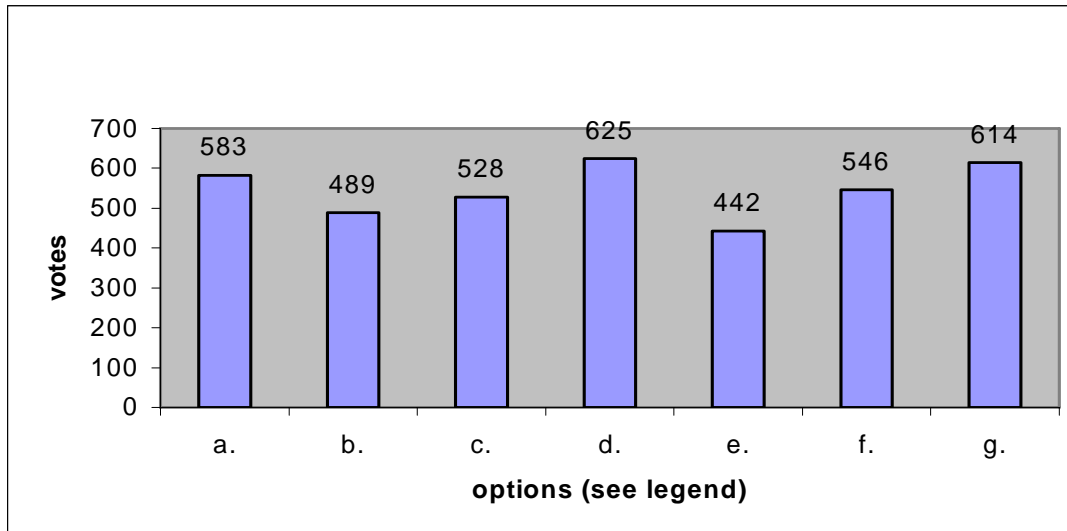
Before fully analyzing the strategies themselves, it is appropriate to identify the factors as determined by the major researchers that are considered to be critical to the success of an absence management strategy.

Iverson (2000) said that the main human resource management strategies for reducing absenteeism include:

- Accurate, understandable, meaningful and timely data
- Create a more involved and participative work environment
- Provide greater job scope for employees
- Implement a policy of greater flexibility and discretion
- Ensure the effective utilization of employee assistance programs
- Set targets
- Train and empower supervisors to be more proactive
- Encourage ownership and accountability among supervisors for the problem
- Promote an attendance culture
- Reinforce continuous improvement through public recognition
- Ensure that disciplinary systems are equitable and effective

The Audit Commission (1995) actually promoted a checklist for a sick leave absence policy. This is attached as appendix C.

TFS staff responded through question 19 of the survey as to what strategies or initiatives they thought would reduce the levels of unplanned absence. Refer Figure 1.

Figure1**TFS Staff Priorities to Reduce Absenteeism (Survey Question 19)****Legend**

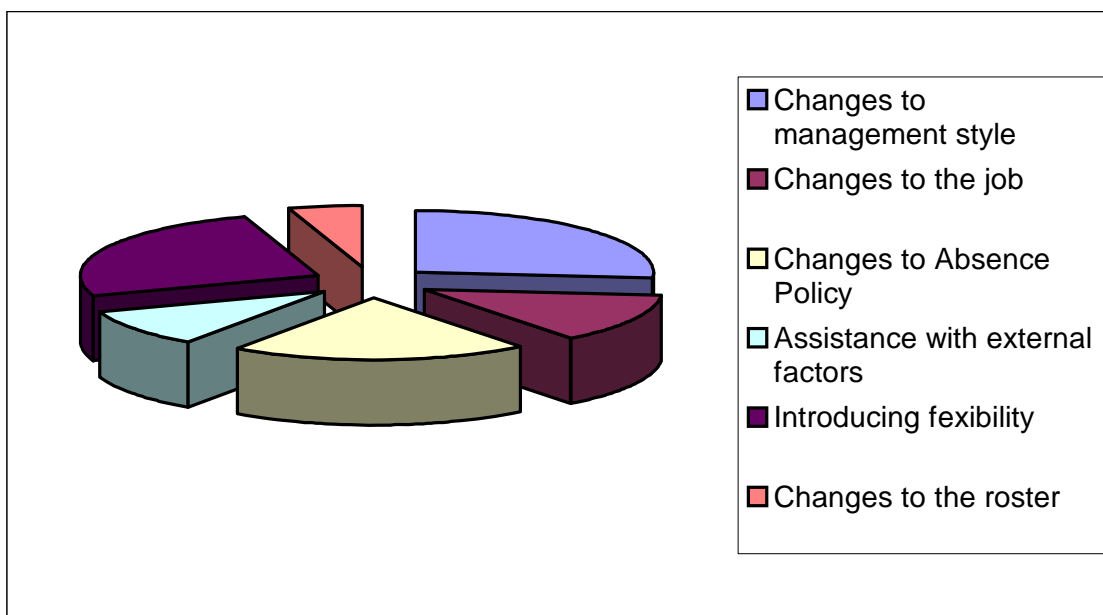
- a. More flexibility with minimum staffing arrangements so that staff can attend dentist/doctors appointments, schools events, funerals etc.
- b. The provision of child or dependent care assistance (either directly or indirectly).
- c. Providing health cover.
- d. More flexible leave arrangements (like the new State Service Accumulated leave Scheme).
- e. More interesting and challenging (less boring) work.
- f. More autonomy and participation in decision-making.
- g. Managing the behaviour of people who may be abusing their sick leave.

Put simply, the survey of TFS staff determined that staff would like more flexibility with their leave (currently annual leave periods are fixed so that each shift worker receives thirty five consecutive days leave every one hundred and eighty days), they also want management to deal with those who may be abusing their sick leave and they would prefer to have some flexibility with minimum staffing arrangements.

Iverson's (1995) study into the health services sector again identifies strategies to reduce absenteeism from the employee's point of view. Refer Figure 2.

Figure 2

Summary of Employees' Suggested Strategies for Reducing Absenteeism



The health services sector shares some job characteristics with fire services such as shift work, emergency response and critical incident stress. Iverson's study on the health services sector favoured changes to management styles, the job itself, and (similar to the TFS response) introducing greater flexibility.

The strategies adopted in the QFRS are highly prescriptive but it can be said that this feature is probably desirable in such a large organization (both geographically and in terms of staff numbers). The prescriptive nature of their sick leave management policy would help ensure consistency and quality control as every step in the process is very clearly documented in terms of precisely who does what, when and how. To ensure that all parties are consistent in the application of the policy the policy even includes a kit of all the necessary documentation and templates for the manager/supervisors action planner and case letters.

As previously stated, the QRFS policy was only implemented late last year, so at present it is difficult to determine how successful the program is. When reviewed against Iverson's (1995) general human resource strategies and the checklist for sickness absence policies at appendix C, the QFRA policy would appear to have all the qualities of a sound absence management strategy.

The simple system used by the NTFS features none of the sophistication and complexity of the QFRA policy and yet the simple act of measurement as seen in the NTFS strategy (and in other large organizations mentioned earlier in the paper), can be a highly effective intervention for increasing attendance and will more than offset the clerical or (more likely) computer costs involved in the recording. Another benefit in this approach of only recording attendance, rather than the reason for absenteeism, is that supervisory judgment and effort is minimized.

The NTFS model is successful firstly because of its outstanding results, an initial reduction of almost 40 percent, and secondly because of its simplicity. It's also noted that historical research indicates that similar simple and cost effective systems have been effective in other organizations.

QRFA's comprehensive model has not as yet been evaluated however the principles and components of the model contain almost all the elements of the sickness absence checklist included at appendix C.

An advantage of the QRFA model over the NTFS model is the necessary involvement of supervisors in the counseling and record keeping processes, where as the NTFS model may be seen as not much more than 'statistics from head office'. This involvement and 'buy in' from supervisors is likely to assist the program in working well for the long term. The NTFS system may not work as well over the long term.

Research Question 3 – Which strategies is likely to work in the TFS? Why?

To effectively manage absenteeism within the TFS and encourage work attendance requires the introduction of strategies that will, in the long term, reduce the amount of unplanned absences taken by employees.

The strategy likely to work in the TFS will include elements of both the NTFS model and the QRFA model. While the former system is simple and produces positive results (at least in the short term) it does not include enough input from the front line managers.

Previous absence management practices within the TFS have to a large extent implied to employees a sense of permissiveness of management towards absenteeism. As supported by the literature, a perceived lack of concern or attention towards absenteeism by management can result in increased levels of leave taking (Iverson RD, 1995).

Cullinan (1995) cited in Foot (1998, p. 13) argued that "to a large extent the employee decision to attend the workplace will be influenced by whether they feel that their absence will be unchallenged, and in fact if any one cares".

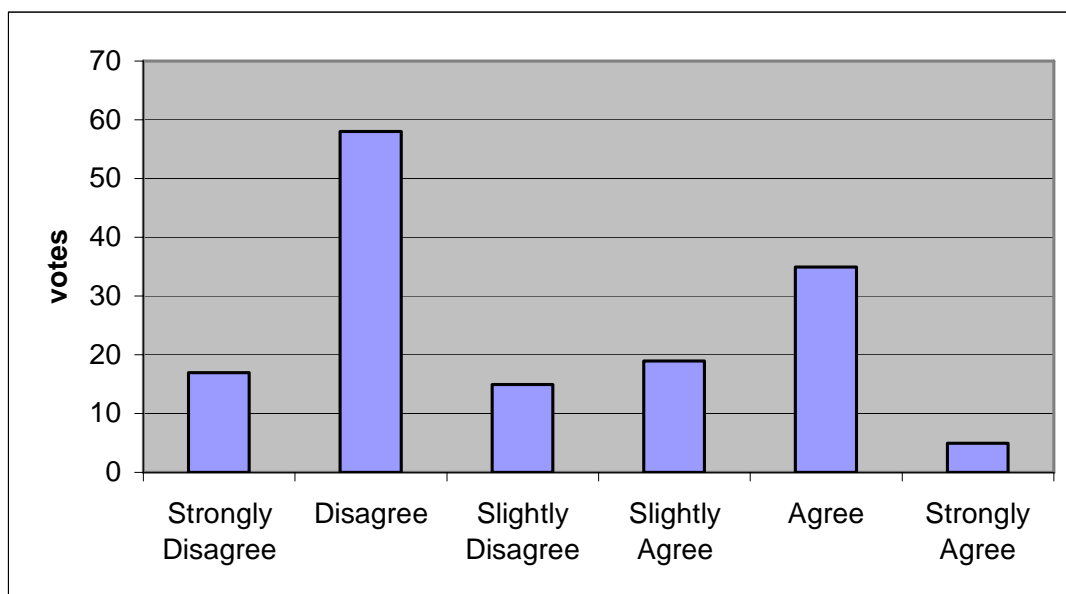
The TFS survey posed a question (question 8) to staff that TFS management doesn't appear concerned about the level of sick leave being taken, or following up on sick leave

occurrences. Interestingly the trend in the Responses was that most (60%) disagreed with the statement. See Figure 3

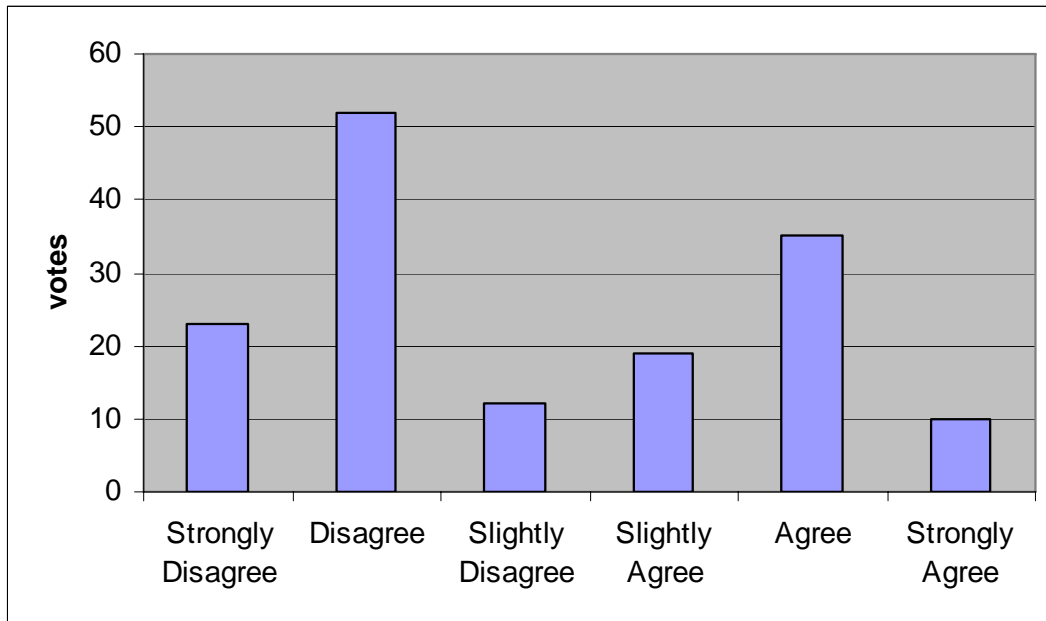
Figure 3

TFS Absence Management Survey – Question 8

“TFS management doesn’t appear concerned about the level of sick leave being taken, or following up on sick leave occurrences”.



On the same subject of monitoring and following up, another question (question 10) posed the statement that supervisors should follow up and monitor all occurrences of unplanned absence. Again the response was that around 57% disagreed with the statement. See Figure 4

Figure 4**TFS Absence Management Survey – Question 10****“Supervisors should follow up on all occurrences of unplanned absences”**

While these responses indicate that most staff don't want changes to the current permissiveness of management, it must be remembered that most respondents to the survey are not supervisors themselves. Having 40% of staff in favour of showing more concern about the use of sick leave is significant. In addition, When question twelve suggested it may be OK to take a shift off every now and then if no other leave is readily available. Almost a quarter (24%) of responders said it was OK. Clearly this group would not want anyone following up on their inappropriate use of leave. So that group could reasonably be expected to disagree with the statements posed in the questions.

The strategies most likely to result in a reduction in unplanned absences will focus on three main areas:

- Education and training for managers and supervisors

- The provision of a comprehensive data base that allows analysis of absenteeism within the TFS
- The development of internal attendance policy

Details of these strategies are included in the recommendation section of this paper.

DISCUSSION

The notion of absence culture would appear to be evident in the TFS and in the State fire services in Western Australia and Melbourne. All three fire services have in recent times undertaken an analysis of their organization's use of sick leave. An alarming finding from all services was the patterns of absenteeism on weekends.

The TFS survey results indicated that sickness was the primary reason for the use of non-certified leave, research, particularly of shift workers and fire service staff, indicates additional factors influencing the frequency and amount of non-certified leave taken by staff.

Single day sick leave absences are usually accounted for with a statutory declaration and thus recorded as non-certified leave. It would be reasonable to expect that genuine sick leave would occur on all days of the week in a relatively consistent pattern. This is not the case. An analysis of TFS single day sick leave shows a pattern of increased non-certified and unplanned absences on Saturdays and Sundays. Furthermore this trend occurs year after year.

In respect to the MFESB, McInerney states that while the overall rate of absenteeism has increased considerably in recent years, the relative indicators within this overall figure highlight the significant proportion of short-term absences taken on Friday and Saturday nights and Sundays. Consideration should be given to why short-term absenteeism is taken more often on weekends. According to McInerney (1997) social and family reasons appear to be the answer.

Western Australia's fire service also exhibits the same problems, and has done for several years.

A similar analysis was undertaken of TFS day worker staff (they generally have weekends off) to establish if any patterns were evident in the absence data. The analysis found a trend of slightly higher absence rates on Mondays and, to a lesser degree, Fridays. Again it would be reasonable to assume that this is due to social and family reasons, with an apparent opportunity to create a long weekend.

These patterns of unplanned absence on and adjacent to weekends reflect on the management of the organizations as permissiveness. The TFS survey found that almost a quarter of respondents believed it was acceptable to use a sick day every now and then if no other leave was available. TFS management does little to manage or change this culture, as there is virtually no follow up on absenteeism issues.

An analysis of information provided by TFS and other Australian fire services suggests that employees and indeed many managers view absence management as a function of the personnel department, for financial purposes only and not as an integral part of human resource management for all level of the organization. Existing management practices appear permissive of an absence culture rather than a culture of commitment.

The absence of an attendance management program within the TFS has the capacity to directly impact on the employee's attitude toward absenteeism and also indicates a perceived absence permissiveness from management. This sends a negative message to employees and can result in reduced morale and commitment to the organization.

Brooks (1998) cited in Foot (1998) suggested that the notable absence of any service strategy to manage absenteeism sends a clear message to employees that accessing sick leave is an 'easy mark'. A program to manage absenteeism within the organization would increase

the accountability of the manager and employee and improve the existing situation. The current situation suggests that TFS management is devolved of managing absenteeism within the workplace.

Abigail (1998) cited in Foot (1998) theorizes that an absence management program within the organization would result in employees thinking twice about accessing sick leave if they thought that management took an active interest in reducing absenteeism. Any such program would also result in improved communication channels between employees and management regarding the issue.

There is no doubt that such factors as the patterns of absenteeism, the history of absenteeism, and the perception of management permissiveness in respect to absenteeism, has resulted in the establishment of a deeply entrenched absence culture. While the extent of the absence problem is not particularly great in the TFS, there are clearly many good reasons to reduce absenteeism.

It seems the culture has always been strong and widespread in fire services. “The London Fire Brigades do have a culture” (Hay, 1999, p. 7). His study also found that “the most influential people in terms of culture are the officers-in-charge of watches”. This view is supported in the findings of McInerney (1997) as his survey and research found that the best environments for good attendance performance was considered to be where officers operate responsibly, and there is good team orientation. The worst environments were those where officers are bitter and twisted, or where controls are dictatorial. The dictatorial controls aspect of fire service management was also identified as a negative by Yu-Chan (2001, p. 24) where he said; “I found that the paramilitary style of management has a negative effect on both the psychological well-being and job attitudes of firefighters”.

Goodman et al (1984) stated that the organizational dimension of absence culture is largely a product of the organization's technology, control system, status hierarchy, division of labour and so on.

To summarize the findings so far would indicate a need for an absence management program that presented absence data in an accurate, easily understood and relevant way, the training of supervisors and managers in the management of absence management issues and the development of an absence management policy or program. The issues that have not as yet been addressed are those involving the commitment of the most influential in respect to the organization's culture, the supervisors.

For the absence program to work it will need the 'buy in' or commitment from the base level supervisors, known in the TFS as Station Officers.

In respect to issues of organization change, the literature continues to emphasize that it is the cultural issues that are the most difficult to change. A long and established history in relation to a perceived tolerance of absenteeism is one such cultural issue.

The NFA CMM is a four-phase model for managing change within organizations. Phase One, the analysis of the organizational change requirement is already addressed in this paper. Phase Two deals with planning to respond to determine change requirements. This phase will require top level organizational support in such matters as selecting the appropriate people for the change management team, setting goals and time lines, examining forces and issues for and against the change, and the assessment and selection of techniques to support and promote the change.

The implementation is the third phase. This will firstly involve careful timing and the use of selected communication techniques prior to the development and implementation of change enabling mechanisms. The fourth phase will be continuing, as it is the evaluation and

institutionalism of the program/policy. Continued dissemination of absence data and review and evaluation of the data will dictate any necessary changes to the program/policy.

Absenteeism is much more complex than an employee taking the occasional 'sickie'. It imposes a significant financial burden on the TFS, creates difficulties in managing service delivery, and if not managed correctly, causes morale and attitude problems amongst employees. Absence culture can evolve if the employee perceives that management is permissive of the problem. It is reasonable to assume that if nothing is done to address absenteeism the problem will continue. Therefore it is imperative that the TFS develop change management strategies to reduce absenteeism.

The strategies identified in this paper are not targeted to discriminate against the genuinely ill who cannot attend work. They are rather designed to improve managerial skills in dealing with absence, promote awareness of the problem within the workplace and provide employees with the opportunity to enhance their work environment by participating in the development and implementation of a absence management program/policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The TFS levels of unplanned absences actually compare favorably with similar organizations. This is most likely a product of small organizational and work group size, relative industrial harmony, reasonable employer-employee relations and good moral. It is not as a result of good absence management strategies or attendance programs, because such programs currently don't exist.

The recommendations are:

1. That TFS educate and train supervisors and managers in respect to absence management.

The aim is to educate and train TFS supervisors and managers in their roles and responsibilities and for them to create an awareness within the TFS reducing absenteeism is within their span of control.

The proposed plan is that, in cooperation with the TFS Human Resources section, a training program is developed focusing on dealing with absenteeism.

The program is to include:

- The role of managers/supervisors in absence management
- Counseling skills development
- Recognition and support for sick/distressed employees
- Keeping contact with employees and the use of feed back

The program should be kept simple and short in duration. Refresher training should be provided on an annual basis.

The costs associated with the development and conduct of the training program would include Human Resource staff time consumables and shift coverage costs or award rates for supervisors/managers attending the course.

The benefits would be an improved awareness of TFS managers/supervisors in how to address issues involving absence and a subsequent on supporting an attendance culture within the TFS.

2. The TFS establish a comprehensive database monitoring system.

The aim is for the TFS to establish and promote a database, which allows the compilation of all relevant data concerning absenteeism within the TFS.

It is proposed that the TFS Information Technology section work with the organizations Human Resources section to enhance the existing absence data

collection system. The enhanced system must be able to provide an analysis of current and past rate, pattern and distribution of sick leave (non-certified and certified) for all employees.

Costs associated with the enhancement of the current staff management software would include time and labour costs of the Information Technology staff or contractor, the purchase costs of necessary new hardware and software, and training costs for TFS supervisors/managers on the use of the program.

The benefits of a comprehensive attendance data collection system are that accurate absence data can be maintained. This will assist in the analysis of patterns and trends to facilitate policy development. The collection and dissemination of data will also reinforce awareness that TFS management is being proactive in addressing the current absence problems.

3. That the TFS develop a service absence policy.

The aim is to produce a clear statement of the objectives and principle by which attendance will be promoted within the TFS

It is proposed that using the current AFAC guidelines as a basis, a TFS absence policy be developed. The policy should include:

- A clear statement of the TFS expectations of employee attendance
- Employee leave entitlements
- Process and actions where absences occur
- Guidelines for the management of individual cases where regular absence occurs

Due to the impact on employees and the commitment under the EBA 1999 it is highly desirable that employee/union involvement be sought in the development and

implementation of the policy. The change management issues should follow the process and principles as outlined in the *NFA CMM Student Manual*.

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APPENDIX A – SAMPLE MEMO

Memo to: Staff employed under the Tasmanian Fire Fighting Industry Employees Award 1995

From: Deputy Regional Officer/Brigade Chief, Michael Brown

October 3, 2000

Dear Colleagues,

**Tasmania Fire Service
Absence Management Behaviors Survey**

I am currently representing our organisation and the Australasian Fire Authorities Council at the United States National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) at Emmitsburg in Maryland.

As part of my studies I am required to complete a comprehensive applied research project as a requirement of the Executive Development unit of EFOP. I chose this topic because it will help us to meet one of the objectives we need to achieve under the 1999 Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA); 'the implementation of an absence management strategy'. To this end, I have prepared a survey to assist in gaining an understanding of staff behaviors, attitudes and opinions in respect to the use of unplanned leave.

The survey is restricted to staff working under the Fire Fighting Industry Employees Award 1995. As most questions do not require a written answer, it should take no more than 5-10 minutes to complete.

To maintain anonymity it is important that your name is NOT written on your survey. Please place your completed survey form in a sealed envelope addressed to myself and send through the internal mail system by October 13.

I can be contacted on 6336 5602 or 0419 569 389 should you require any further clarification.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Brown
Deputy Regional Officer/Brigade Chief
Participant, National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program

APPENDIX B - SURVEY

United States National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program

Survey of absence management behaviors in the Tasmania Fire Service

A survey for full time employees of the Tasmania Fire Service employed under the Tasmanian Fire Fighting Industry Employees Award 1995.

This survey is to examine employee's behaviors, attitudes and opinions in respect to the use and management of unplanned leave. The survey results may be used in the development of management processes that will assist in reducing unplanned absences (per sect. 15, 'Tasmanian Fire Fighting Industry Employees Enterprise Bargaining Agreement 1999).

To retain anonymity, you are requested to NOT write your name on this form.

1. Please tick the box indicating the brigade, division or area you have worked in predominantly over the past two years.

- a. Hobart Fire Brigade
- b. Launceston Fire brigade
- c. Devonport Fire Brigade
- d. Burnie Fire Brigade
- e. Field Operations (NW, North or Southern Regions)
- f. Training Services (any location)
- g. TasFire Equipment (any location)
- h. TasFire Training (any location)
- i. Community Education (any location)
- j. Building Fire Safety (any location)
- m. FireComm

2. Please tick the box indicating your predominant work pattern for the past two years.

- a. Rostered shift work (e.g. 10/14)
- b. Non-rostered shift work (e.g. 320hrs per 8 week av)

3. Have you taken sick leave using a statutory declaration over the past two years?

- a. Yes
- b. No

4. If you answered yes to question 3 please tick the box best describing the amount of non-certified (statutory declaration - no doctors certificate provided) leave you have taken. Otherwise go to question 5.

- a. 1 shift
- b. 2-3 shifts
- c. 4 or more shifts

5. Indicate by ticking box(s), reason(s) for your use of non-certified (statutory declaration - no doctors certificate provided) leave.

- a. Sick (self)
- b. Sick (dependents)
- c. Recreational use
- d. Child minding
- e. Compassionate
- f. No real reason
- g. Other (please indicate) -----

6. Your position is best described as:

- a. Line worker (e.g. Firefighter)
- b. Supervisory(e.g. Station officer or Leading Firefighter)
- c. Managerial (e.g. DO)

On the next 10 questions, please tick the box that best describes your views in the relation to the statement.

7. Some doctors sometimes give out sick leave certificates too easily.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

8. TFS management doesn't appear concerned about the level of sick leave being taken, or following up on sick leave occurrences.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

9. Sick leave should only be used for genuine sickness.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

10. Supervisors should follow up and monitor all occurrences of unplanned absences.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

11. It's OK to use sick leave to take a day or a shift off every now and then.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

12. It's OK to use sick leave to take a day or a shift off every now and then if no other leave is readily available.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

13. I believe that sick leave is like an insurance policy to cover me only when I'm sick.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

14. I believe that sick leave is an entitlement to leave that I can use whenever I feel like it.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

15. I find it annoying when people I work with are away from work on sick leave and I don't believe they are genuinely sick.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

16. Generally the people I work with know which individuals abuse the use of their sick leave.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Slightly disagree
- d. Slightly agree
- e. Agree
- f. Strongly agree

17. Rate from 1-4 (with 1 being the lowest value) the costs of unplanned absences.

- a. Disruption to planned training
- b. Change in team dynamics
- c. Dollar value

d. Other (please indicate) -----

18. Do you consider the incidence of unplanned absences (in your immediate work area, over the past two years) to be :

- a. Increasing or
- b. Decreasing

19. To reduce the incidence of unplanned absences the TFS should consider (rate 1-8, with 1 being the lowest value, in order of importance to you).

- a. More flexibility with minimum staffing arrangements so that staff can attend dentist/doctors appointments schools events, funerals etc.
- b. The provision of child or dependent care assistance (either directly or indirectly).
- c. Providing health cover.
- d. More flexible leave arrangements (like the new State Service Accumulated Leave Scheme).
- e. More interesting and challenging (less boring) work.
- f. More autonomy and participation in decision-making.
- g. Managing the behavior of people who may be abusing their sick leave
- f. Other (please indicate).....

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey. Please place it in the envelope provided and send it back to me through the internal mail system.

*Michael Brown
Tasmania Fire service
Launceston*

APPENDIX C - CHECKLIST

A checklist for Sickness Absence Policies

Does the policy:

- form part of an overarching dynamic and strategic approach to workplace health, and an integral part of the fire authority's health and safety policy?
- specify how sickness absence should be recorded, monitored and analyzed to identify patterns and trends, and to enable effort to be appropriately targeted?
- incorporate a commitment to health promotion and lifestyle counseling to encourage a healthier workforce?
- specify clearly the responsibilities of the organisation towards each individual employee, and the responsibilities of employees to the organisation?
- give sufficient focus to the value of employees to the organisation, and the importance of good attendance, as well as to the impact of their absence?
- apply to all employees in the organisation, with relevant provision made according to their roles, and is it equitable, clear and easy to understand?
- promote a supportive approach rather than punitive?

- establish procedures for identifying factors in the workplace that cause or contribute to ill health, and for addressing these?
- differentiate between procedures for dealing with short and long-term absence?
- provide effective and realistic targets for improvement in sickness absence, and make provision for routine monitoring of performance /
- specify clearly the responsibilities and accountabilities of individuals, line managers, brigade management and members of the fire authority?
- explain clearly the procedure to be followed when employees report absent due to sickness, and responsibilities of line managers in this respect?
- include appropriate arrangements for maintaining supportive, effective and regular contact with personnel absent from work due to sickness?
- provide for all accidents and injuries sustained by personnel, whether on or off duty, to be appropriately investigated and documented?
- require 'return to work interviews' to be undertaken in a supportive manner, resulting in agreed outcomes and adequate recording?
- require the fire authority to be regularly informed about sickness absence and the associated costs?

- include arrangements to provide support for employees suffering from drug and alcohol-related illness, substance abuse and stress?
- establish trigger points for management interventions that are appropriate and effective, with timely and effective referrals to the OHS?
- require 'modified duties' to be used whenever possible as an aid to rehabilitation, and is the employee and the line manager included in the discussion about the duties to be performed?
- require ethical guidelines to be followed and confidentiality maintained by all personnel?
- differentiate between management of sickness absence and the use of other 'capability' measures?

(Audit Commission, 1995, p. 106)